

ARTÍCULO RESEÑA

ENGENDERING VALLE-INCLÁN

STEPHEN J. SUMMERHILL
The Ohio State University

Carol Maier and Roberta Salper have edited an interesting collection of essays drawn from several sources called *Ramón María del Valle-Inclán: Questions of Gender*¹. The eleven articles in the volume provide a useful introduction to the complexity of studying gender in canonical male writers from periods not our own. Few would dispute the preeminence of Ramón María del Valle-Inclán as *the* major Spanish author of the first third of the twentieth century. His relentless drive to push his art beyond the limits of tradition, his complex exploration of self-dispersion or otherness, and his evolution from late nineteenth century aesthete to post-World War I social radical give him a unique place in Spanish literature as perhaps the most daring writer of his period.

And yet, we know that Valle-Inclán sometimes spoke disparagingly about women and that a few recent critics have even called him a misogynist. Would a gender-oriented reading of his work reveal him to be less progressive than we had thought? Or is it merely reductionist to impose the standards of a later period on an earlier one? Indeed, knowing how ambiguous all interpretation can be, maybe we could construe an argument that the author of *Divinas palabras* was really a feminist in disguise. Concern about such issues made me eager to see the material in this volume.

As it turns out, the book is careful, reasoned, and with the exception of one or two less strong articles, extremely interesting. The authors recognize that Valle-Inclán held a very traditional and conflictive idea about the relationship between men and women. At the

¹ Lewisburg PA, Bucknell UP, 1994, 264 pp.

same time, they also show how he mocked or parodied most traditional images of masculinity—the Don Juan figure, soldiers, statesmen, and many others—while opening large sectors of his work to alternative modes of understanding that can be associated with the feminine. Moreover, as he grew older he seems to have felt an increasing attraction toward those who resist oppression and break boundaries, including women; and he consistently attacked the idea of domesticity and the family. The result is a richly ambiguous vision that does not easily fit within typical categories. Valle-Inclán was certainly not a feminist, but neither is it sufficient to pass him off as a misogynist. Indeed, several essays in this volume suggest that, though it is probably an exaggeration to think of him as having given real voice to the feminine, there is no doubt that his understanding of women became more profound as he grew older and that perhaps he even became aware of gender as a social construct.

The first three articles of the volume are reprinted from other sources. They have been included, the editors tell us, to provide continuity with what has gone before. All establish the framework of the volume by arguing that Valle-Inclán seemed open to women but still maintained a male perspective. Thus, in the first of these articles, «Valle-Inclán's 'La Generala': Woman as Birdbrain», Catherine Nickel analyzes how Currita, the feminine character of the story, carries elements that undermine female stereotypes while also remaining fully traditional. In the second essay, «The Novel as Feminine Entrapment: Valle-Inclán's *Sonata de Otoño*», Noël Valis discovers an underlying contradiction in the novel between masculine and feminine modes of storytelling. Valis believes that Valle-Inclán is attracted to feminine narration such as myth and oral tales, but that possibly because of a masculine fear of self-loss, he ultimately pursues a traditional male authorship. This article is very thought-provoking and highly recommended.

In the third reprinted article, «The Role of Language in the Creation of Valle-Inclán's Female Characters», Biruté Cipliauskaitė also concludes, like Valis, that Valle-Inclán never stops being a male author. In spite of certain attempts to explore feminine consciousness and language, his context and goals were different, and we should not exaggerate his contribution to the emergence of a feminine perspective or voice.

Among the eight original articles, four seem to me especially important. Three of these deal wholly or in part with Valle-Inclán's early texts, possibly because several stories, such as those in *Feme-*

ninas (1895), have female protagonists. One of the strongest essays in this initial group of four, in my opinion, is Mary Ellen Bieder's study of the gaze or look in the story «Rosarito». Working with feminist film criticism, Bieder analyzes the feminine as an image constructed by the male. If it acquires independence, it threatens the male ego, which therefore dominates and eliminates it. This article not only elucidates many aspects of «Rosarito» but also shows the gendering of perspective and focalization. It could serve as a model for analyzing perspective in works by other male authors.

In another excellent article, «Venus Impera? Women and Power in *Femeninas* and *Epitalamio*», Catherine Davies suggests that the early texts show weak or absent male authority figures. This does not suddenly liberate women, but it does produce a series of ambiguous situations with respect to power. Then, in a superb piece that covers several works, «Modernism and Margins: Valle-Inclán and the Politics of Gender, Nation, and Empire», Mary Addis and Roberta Salper take a more overtly socio-historical approach. They find an important evolution in Valle-Inclán from an early male-centered vision through a more critical awareness of gender to a conscious identification with marginalized figures. This last occurs above all in one of his most interesting and liberated female characters, La Sini, in *La hija del capitán* (1927).

This Addis-Salper piece should be read beside Michael Predmore's excellent essay on *Aguila de blasón* (1907). Predmore believes that in this work, the male-centered world of Juan Manuel Montenegro loses its moral authority to a feminine ideal centered in Sabelita. He offers a convincing argument that women emerge as innocent victims of the old order and stand as Valle-Inclán's new heroes. In this sense, Sabelita anticipates La Sini and corroborates the argument for recognizing Valle-Inclán's growing defense of feminine consciousness.

Though I felt I learned less from the remaining four articles of the volume, all do have something positive to add. In an interesting meditation, Carol Maier suggests a new interpretation of *Divinas palabras* by linking it to the theme of writing in *La lámpara maravillosa*. Maier thinks of the work as a signifier without a signified, a situation that points to the idea of ambiguity and the «divine words» of the title, as well as to the «spiritual exercises» of *La lámpara maravillosa*. Like all of Maier's work, this essay is very

thought-provoking. At the same time, however. I was unable to see how the question of gender was important to its ideas, and the article therefore appeared somewhat misplaced in this volume.

In another piece that is also quite solid, C. Christopher Soufas compares Goya's *Caprichos* with *Tirano Banderas* (1926) to show a kind of a perpetual (and unhappy) struggle between feminine values and patriarchal society. And Roberta Johnson finds several similarities between *Sonata de otoño* and Marina Mayoral's contemporary novel, *Cándida, otra vez*. Though seemingly reliable in her approach, Johnson is more convincing about the overall framework than about the details.

Finally, Iris Zavala says that parody in Valle-Inclán deconstructs traditional perspectives and produces a new undecidability about gender. As so often in this critic's work, potentially stimulating ideas are hurt by conceptual vagueness and an absence of well-developed examples.

The editors acknowledge that, given its introductory nature, the volume fails to touch on many aspects of Valle-Inclán, nor does it pursue a full theory of gender. Questions remain about Valle's real-life relationship to women, the connection in his writing between gender and sexuality, or additional works not mentioned in this volume, such as the other *Sonatas* or *Flor de santidad*, to name just a few. Still, there is a surprising consistency among the authors of these essays that Valle-Inclán was ambiguous, contradictory, and gradually evolving toward a greater awareness of complexity in his understanding of gender.

Finally, one can hope that in a small way, these articles will encourage much needed work on other authors of the period as well as the underlying problem of the relationship between modernism and gender in Spain. It would be important to analyze the masculine gaze in Azorín, Unamuno, or Gómez de la Serna, for example, or to look at the role of women in Benavente, Grau, or other dramatists, or to study the link between the feminine and modernity in Ortega y Gasset. If it is true, as some of the critics in this volume have said, that compared to earlier and later periods, women authors underwent a temporary eclipse during the first decades of the twentieth century, a study of gender in the period should teach us many things about Spanish modernism that we do not yet understand. In this light, Maier and Salper should be praised for having given us a superb beginning.